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ABSTRACT

A number of conclusions can be drawn from an examination of epistemological questions relevant to the building of a theory of research practice in educational administration: (1) the realms addressed by the human sciences and by the natural sciences differ markedly in degree if not in kind; (2) the "theory" movement was guided epistemologically by an uncritical acceptance of natural science presuppositions; (3) epistemologies inherent in the natural sciences are incapable of guiding inquiry into the "ought" dimensions of practice; (4) we need more intensive study to determine the modes of inquiry and epistemological presuppositions that are most appropriate for guiding the long-range study of management and leadership practices in educational organizations; and (5) in seeking to build a theory of practice that encompasses both the real and the ideal, two strategies, a coexistence strategy and an integrative strategy, can be identified. (DS)

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SOME KEY EPISTEMOLOGICAL QUESTIONS ABOUT A "THEORY OF PRACTICE"

By

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Some Key Epistemological Questions About a "Theory of Practice"

I want to begin with some selected quotations. In a 1978 book on leadership there is this observation: "It is no secret that dissatisfaction with methods and with results is rampant among social scientists, across a wide spectrum of content areas . . . there is a feeling of disillusionment and an urge to throw the captain overboard. No captains can be found--only a yellow document, spelling out the canons of experimental science . . ."[1]

Donald R. Eastman, writing in Change recently, observed: "The present state of American literary scholarship and criticism reveals a culture in exhausted disarray."[2] And in the December 1978 issue of Administrative Science Quarterly, Gerald Susman and Roger E. Evered concluded: "There is a crisis in the field of organizational science."[3]

Given such wide-ranging expressions of discontent, it is understandable that there is visible concern and "critical consciousness" about inquiry in the field of educational administration. It also seems appropriate that as other fields of inquiry seek new meaning and definition, so too should we.

Almost a year ago at the Fourth International Intervisitation Programme, arguing for a re-orientation in our research and theorizing, I called for the development during the decades ahead of a "Theory of Practice."[4] Among other things, I pointed to the unique context and mission of schools and maintained that our theories should inform management and leadership practices in educational institutions. Today, may I suggest that if we are to achieve a sound base, long-range, for developing a theory of practice, the thorough examination of our most fundamental presuppositions about inquiry is mandatory. Therefore, I would like to initiate such an examination by identifying and briefly discussing a few epistemological issues which have far-reaching implications for the development of theory in our field and which will need more intensive and thorough treatment in the days ahead.

As we identify presuppositions about inquiry in our field, we come immediately to a fundamental question: Do we assume that the nature of knowledge about human matters generally--and educational administration specifically--is similar to the nature of knowledge of natural phenomena? Further, do the epistemological assumptions and modes of inquiry inherent in the natural sciences offer sound and complete guides for our own field? The importance of these questions stems from the great influence which natural science epistemologies have had on the study of social affairs generally and upon our own field particularly. Those of us who experienced the theory movement in educational administration in the 1950's and 1960's, and were aware of its underlying positivistic assumptions, for example, know that its epistemology came to us in unadapted form directly from the natural sciences; further, that many scholars accepted the epistemology of positivism uncritically.

We can formulate three different positions on the general question. Knowledge about humanity and about nature is similar; is different, but only in degree; or is different in kind. If the two types of knowledge are similar, then their epistemologies and modes of inquiry should be interchangeable. If they differ only in degree, then the same epistemologies can likely be applied to both, but adaptations will be required. But if they are different in kind, their epistemologies and modes of inquiry would need to be clearly differentiated.

Distinguished philosophers and scientists have addressed the issue since at least the time of Aristotle and especially in the last century. Herbert Simon, for example, in his 1969 book entitled The Sciences of the Artificial, contrasted the "artificial sciences," which address the human-made world, with the natural sciences, which focus upon the physical world.[5] And in the nineteenth century, Wilhelm Dilthey made a major comparative study of the cultural and natural sciences.[6] From such studies have come varied generalizations about how the human and the physical worlds differ and, in turn, the epistemologies and modes of inquiry needed for studying these worlds. I now offer three general observations, designed to highlight important differences in the two realms . . . differences which, I would argue, have very important implications for developing a theory of practice.

First, organizations and other social artifacts are designed by human beings to serve their ends. Consequently, such artifacts do not exist independently of human beings, as do elements in the natural world--mountains and stars, for example. Facts, then, about natural science phenomena appear in consciousness as coming from without and as defined in relationship to individual objects, while in the cultural sciences facts about experience and even behavior often appear as coming from within and as a part of a larger whole.[7] Since the researcher is excluded from the physical world but is an integral part of the cultural world, the attainment of neutral and objective perspectives in the latter arena is much more problematic than in the physical arena. Put differently, the relationships between the researcher and the researched in the human sciences are shaped by ethical considerations, by constraints on research design, by the effects of cultural immersion, and by biases in ways which do not operate in the physical sciences.

A second and related observation is that the goals and operations of organizations frequently change because of human intervention, in direct contrast to the physical world where human intervention affects not at all, for example, the turning of the earth and the orbiting of heavenly bodies. Thus greater mutability and unpredictability exist in cultural than in natural arenas. Because diverse human beings and groups are free to intervene at any time in their own affairs, organizational life is constantly undergoing uncontrolled and unpredicted change. This means, in Simon's words, that natural phenomena "have an air of necessity about them in their subservience to natural law" while "artificial phenomena have an air of contingency about them because of their malleability by environment."[8] An extensive natural science tradition, then, speaks to explanation and predictability, while in the human sciences there has been a growing tendency to speak of interpretation and understanding. The validity of applying standardized modes of inquiry long used in the natural sciences for predictive purposes (e.g., the hypothetical-deductive method) in the contingency-laden contexts of organizations is also being questioned.

Third, in human enterprises such as are represented in school systems, decisions about ends and means are shaped by moral considerations, considerations not affecting, let us say, the dynamics of atomic particle flow. In other words, we face no inherent requirements for addressing and resolving ethical questions in the natural world. Consequently, the natural sciences can concentrate upon describing and explaining

what is. By contrast, there is an ever-present tendency in arenas like education to examine critically what is and to determine objectives and policy to guide improvement. Because ethical issues need illumination in organizational life, though not in the natural world, requirements for inquiry should differ markedly in the two realms. Further, since the epistemologies guiding natural science inquiry are directed totally at the status quo, they are ill-equipped to illuminate or define human objectives or policy for transcending the status quo.

How to treat ethics and ideals in human studies, a task not encountered in studies of nature, poses a special problem for epistemology. The solution offered by such philosophers as Kant and Aristotle, who posited two different types of knowledge for dealing with this problem, one theoretical and one practical, is worth our consideration.[9] A major presupposition in this solution is that theoretical knowledge pertains to things as they are, while practical knowledge informs proper courses of action. Thus, practical knowledge is used by actors to intervene in the process of things, while theoretical knowledge contributes to the body of science. Since practical knowledge is used to determine proper ends for actions, it has an important ethical element, a component not found in theoretical knowledge.

A theory for informing management and leadership practices directed at the improvement of instruction, we can assume, would necessarily include practical knowledge because of the educational administrator's continuing need to determine proper courses of action. This brings us to another kind of question: If the modes of inquiry in the natural sciences are directed totally at illuminating what is, and if the administrator must be prepared to lead in developing policy about what should be, what are the implications for epistemology in the field? A related question is: What kind of epistemology is needed to develop a theory of practice which will inform the administrator both about the world as it is and about the world as it might be?

If we look at our past we can say that the pre-1950 period was oriented toward the "ought" dimensions of the administrative world. Recently, for example, I took from my bookcase a reference entitled The Principal at Work, written by an outstanding professor at the University of California with whom I had a course in 1949. The book was as I remembered: filled with hundreds of statements about what the principal "should" or "ought" to do. Published originally in 1941, it was representative of the period. Generalizations were value-laden, analytical and data support very limited. It is understandable that in the early 1950's the theory movement, moving to the other extreme, adopted the epistemological presuppositions that "ought" generalizations were beyond the purview of scholarship and that "is" generalizations were the order of the day.

Given the assumption that the educational administrator continually mediates between the "is" and the "ought" in communities and schools, a theory of practice would be extremely limited if it focused either upon "ought" considerations only or upon "is" considerations only. This means that in a theory of practice one requisite would be some synthesis of the two. Synthesis could proceed in one of two ways. First, following the Aristotelian and Kantian distinction, there could be two coexisting but independent streams of inquiry directed at developing two different bodies of knowledge. One body of knowledge would contain generalizations about the actualities of management and leadership practices, including the contexts of these practices. The other body of knowledge would focus upon such "ought" dimensions as the objectives of management and leadership practice, the societal

ends which schools should serve, and the ethics of decision-making. This dual strategy would assume that a synthesis of knowledge from these two arenas could be achieved by scholars as research is produced or that administrators would integrate the two different types of content in practice contexts. The second synthesis option would integrate "is" and "ought" dimensions of management and leadership practices during research processes. The coexistence strategy, then, would produce two types of knowledge for synthesis, while in the integration strategy, "is" and "ought" dimensions would be synthesized during the design, conduct and analysis of research.

During the last decade the search for integrative strategies of inquiry have become increasingly visible. Educational policy analysis, which studies ongoing practices and projects courses of action for improvement, is one integrative strategy, which William Boyd and Glenn Immegart have recently offered as the focus for an emergent new paradigm for inquiry.[10] Evaluation research illustrates another integrative approach, since it focuses both upon what happens in programs and upon the objectives programs seek--objectives which reflect "ought" judgments about desirable courses of action. Both evaluation research and educational policy analysis represent, then, alternatives already applied for integrating knowledge about proper courses of action within the real world.

There are still other integrative approaches which have not been but could be tested within the field of educational administration. Kenneth Strike, in a recent article entitled "An Epistemology of Practical Research," offers one such example.[11] Following the Aristotelian distinction, Strike speaks of explanatory theories and practical theories.[12] A research program which is concerned with explanatory theories is composed, according to Strike, of a theoretical "hard core" from which auxiliary hypotheses can be derived which require data for testing. The development of practical theories, on the other hand, requires a theoretical normative "hard core," a relevant and interrelated set of norms and empirical theories, plans of action and inquiry to determine the degree to which the outcomes projected in plans are achieved. Strike illustrates his integrative model by elaborating certain norms with regard to the conditions of inequality and opportunities for advancing equality. He then suggests how propositions can be deduced from the norms to form plans to be tested. Strike's projection is linked to the tradition of science and to the hypothetical deductive method, while encompassing normative propositions.

Other approaches to integration have philosophical foundations, as in the "critical theory" movement.[13] In this approach, scholars are interested both in studying organizations as they are and, through critical analysis, in achieving bases for formulating more desirable futures. Dialectical thinking is central to the method of critical theory--thinking which brings to consciousness organizational inadequacies and identifies ways of overcoming these inadequacies. Existing contradictions in human and societal conditions are the focus for dialectical thinking. Examples of contradiction include the thought of freedom as opposed to its actuality or the emancipation of humanity--when faced with the despotism of myth. As far as schools are concerned, contradictions of potential interest to critical theorists would be the ideal of educational opportunity as opposed to the reality of educational inequality, or the ideal of independence versus the reality in schools of student dependence.

In sum, then, an effective theory of practice would inform management and leadership in educational organizations; further, such a theory would necessarily encompass knowledge about both the "is" and the "ought" dimensions of schools and society. We have examined a few epistemological questions relevant to the building of a theory of practice and have concluded or implied the following:

(1) The realms addressed by the human sciences and by the natural sciences differ markedly in degree if not in kind.

(2) The theory movement was guided epistemologically by an uncritical acceptance of natural science presuppositions.

(3) Epistemologies inherent in the natural sciences are incapable of guiding inquiry into the "ought" dimensions of practice.

(4) Given the evident differences in the human and natural sciences, we need more intensive study to determine the modes of inquiry and epistemological presuppositions which are most appropriate for guiding the long-range study of management and leadership practices in educational organizations.

(5) In seeking to build a theory of practice which encompasses both the real and the ideal, two strategies--which are not mutually exclusive--have been briefly identified: a coexistence strategy involving two independent streams of inquiry directed at developing "is" and "ought" oriented bodies of knowledge about practice, on the assumption that some synthesis of the two can be attained; and an integrative strategy which would address and synthesize knowledge of "is" and "ought" dimensions of practice during the design, conduct and completion of the research process.

As we look to the future, we can be buttressed by the fact that this century has produced major and significant developments for the field of educational administration; further, that from our successes and failures we can acquire learnings which can lead to new attainments. For one of the things which human experience teaches us is that in proportion as we realize the limitations of the past do we find release from its restrictions . . . and a freer vision.

Footnotes

[1]Morgan W. McCall, Jr. and Michael M. Lombardo (Eds.) Leadership: Where Else Can We Go? Durham, N. C.: The Duke University Press, 1978, pp. xi.

[2]Donald R. Eastman, "The New Profession of Letters," Change, December-January 1978/79, p. 8.

[3]Gerald I. Susman and Roger D. Evered, "An Assessment of the Scientific Merits of Action Research," Administrative Science Quarterly, Vol. 23, December 1978, p. 582.

[4]Jack Culbertson, "Where We Are and Where We Are Going," in Canadian and Comparative Educational Administration, Robin Farquhar and Ian Housego (Eds.), Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1979. (In press)

[5]Herbert Simon, The Sciences of the Artificial. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1969.

[6]Wilhelm Dilthey, Foundations of the Cultural Sciences. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, Volume VII (Gesammelte Schriften) 1913-67. Also see H. P. Rickman (Editor and Translator), W. Dilthey: Selected Writings. London: Cambridge University Press, 1976. See especially pp. 155-263.

[7]Juergen Habermas, "Dilthey's Theory of Understanding Expression" in Knowledge and Human Interests. Boston: Beacon Press, 1971, p. 145.

[8]Simon, op. cit., p. x.

[9]For an historical review of the views on theoretical and practical knowledge held by different philosophers, see Nathan Rotenstreich, Theory and Practice: An Essay in Human Intentionalities. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

[10]William Lowe Boyd and Glenn L. Immegart, "Education's Turbulent Environment and Problem Finding: Lines of Convergence," in Glenn L. Immegart and William Lowe Boyd (Eds.), Problem Finding in Educational Administration: Trends in Research and Theory. Lexington, Massachusetts: D. C. Heath (Forthcoming, 1979)

[11]Kenneth Strike, "An Epistemology of Practical Research," The Educational Researcher, Volume 8, No. 1, January 1979, p. 13.

[12]Ibid.

[13]For various perspectives on the topic, see John O'Neill (Ed.), On Critical Theory, New York: The Seabury Press, 1976.